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Marina Camodeca^a; Frits A. Goossens^b

^a University of Chieti, Italy ^b Free University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Children's opinions on effective strategies to cope with bullying: the importance of bullying role and perspective

Marina Camodeca^{1*} and Frits A. Goossens²

¹University of Chieti, Italy; ²Free University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

In order to find out what children would suggest as useful interventions to stop bullying, we designed a questionnaire administered to 311 children (155 boys and 156 girls; mean age = 11 years). Thirty-six items were employed to ask children how effective, in their opinion, retaliation, nonchalance and assertiveness could be in stopping bullying. Items were presented to children from three different perspectives (imagine you are the victim, the bully or a witness). We used peer reports to assess children's role in bullying. Children were grouped into bullies, followers of the bully, defenders of the victims, outsiders, victims and those not involved. The strategy most frequently chosen by all children was to cope with bullying through assertiveness. Bullies considered retaliation effective more often than their classmates, especially when they adopted the perspective of the victim or witness. Bullies did not consider assertive strategies as efficient in stopping the bully. Defenders, outsiders, victims and children not involved, on the other hand, were very much in favour of strategies aimed at solving the conflict through nonchalance or assertiveness, especially when they imagined being the bully. Girls chose assertive strategies more often than boys and younger children preferred nonchalance more often than older children, who tended to choose retaliation more often. Suggestions for intervention are made.

Keywords: *Assertiveness; Bully; Nonchalance; Retaliation; Strategy; Victim*

Introduction

Bullying among young children has expanded considerably as a research issue over the past few decades and is now recognized worldwide as a problem. Although intervention programmes have had some success (Olweus, 1993; Smith & Sharp, 1994; Rigby, 1997; Salmivalli *et al.*, forthcoming), bullying still seems to be prevalent and a significant problem at school. There may be bullies who think that bullying is an easy and effective way to accomplish their aims (Sutton *et al.*, 1999) and who are therefore not amenable to interventions. It may be that some interventions demand too much from teachers. It is also possible that the right interventions with long-

*Corresponding author. Faculty of Psychology, University of Chieti, via dei vestini 31, 66013 Chieti, Italy. Email: marina.camodeca@libero.it

lasting effects have not yet been designed, or that current interventions do not address all potential bullying situations. A possible explanation for these deficits is that these interventions have been designed by adults without explicit endorsement from children. One way to find out more about interventions and how children perceive them is to ask children directly about their own opinions.

Some studies asked children what they would do if they were victimized. The strategies most often selected were to seek help (Cowie, 2000; Camodeca *et al.*, 2003), or to feign nonchalance and ignore the behaviour (Salmivalli, Karhunen *et al.*, 1996; Smith *et al.*, 2001). All these strategies were found to be effective in decreasing harassment, while counter-aggression or showing helplessness were less successful (Salmivalli, Karhunen *et al.*, 1996; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 2001). However, all of the above-mentioned studies only investigated a 'reaction' to bullying from a victim; in other words, when interviewing children about measures to be taken to stop bullying, most researchers simply asked them what they would do if they were the victim of bullying. Moreover, we think it is not the only perspective one can have. First, while children may be victimized on occasion, not all of them are victims. They may also be bullies or followers of the bully, they may be outsiders or defenders of the victim. It may be that these children have different opinions on how to stop bullying. It is likely that children who are defenders will always look for ways to oppose the bully, stop the bullying and look after or console the victim. Such actions are not to be expected from the followers of the bully. So it seems probable that the actual role played in the bullying process may influence what one would do if victimized.

Second, children can be asked to produce responses from a different perspective from their own. In other words, it is possible to interview children about what they would do if they imagine being not just the victim, but the bully or witness to a bullying act (Hawkins *et al.*, 2001). Such perspectives are likely to influence the way one looks at victimization. Adopting the witness's perspective might induce children to go away, but might alternatively induce them to stay and form an audience, while imagining being the bully could produce responses about what would be effective to stop the bullying themselves. Thus, there are many factors that may influence what children think should be done about bullying and victimization.

Hypotheses

This study aimed to take into account the real roles children play in the class, as well as different perspectives. We not only ask children what they would do if they were supposedly a victim, a bully or a witness, but also relate these answers to the role they actually play in the bullying situation. We are predominantly interested in finding out whether children respond by retaliating (i.e. counter-aggression and revenge), or by ignoring the problem (i.e. pretending it is not all that serious) or with assertiveness (i.e. firm behaviour not aimed to harm).

As to the actual roles of the children investigated, we expect bullies and victims to choose retaliation, because they have been found to react with counter-aggression when provoked (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Schwartz *et al.*, 1998; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). However, it is also possible that when victims are presented with

several choices, they opt for those that are more effective than retaliation, such as nonchalance or assertiveness, as some studies have reported (cf. Salmivalli, Karhunen *et al.*, 1996; Smith *et al.*, 2001). Outsiders, defenders and children not involved are expected to select positive and genuinely effective responses, namely assertive responses on behalf of the victim.

As for different perspectives, we expect that children adopting the perspective of the bully will not choose retaliation as an effective strategy, because this would mean retaliating against themselves. However, interaction effects between real role and imagined role might also be occurring. We expect that, when thinking from the bullies' perspective, bullies will more often choose responses aimed at maintaining their role. When in the role of victim, bullies are expected to choose responses in which the victim him/herself retaliates against the bully. We base these hypotheses on the fact that bullies believe in their aggression and think that it is the only way to reach their goals (Olweus, 1993; Sutton, 2001). Furthermore, being both reactively and proactively aggressive (Pellegrini *et al.*, 1999; Camodeca *et al.*, 2002; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002), they do not tolerate being bullied and might well retaliate in such a situation.

Finally, we also investigate differences in gender and age. We expect girls to be more assertive than boys, who will more often choose retaliation as an effective means. We based our hypotheses on the fact that girls condemn bullying and feel upset by it more often than boys (Menesini *et al.*, 1997). It is therefore possible that their solutions are stricter vis-à-vis the bully. However, it has been acknowledged (Crick & Bigbee, 1988; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick *et al.*, 1997) that there are different types of bullying—i.e. direct bullying (both verbal and physical) and indirect (relational) bullying. Examples of the latter are damaging someone's reputation by gossiping or isolating someone from the peer group. It has also been found (Björkqvist *et al.*, 1992; Crick *et al.*, 1997) that girls are more likely to use relational bullying, while boys are more often engaged in direct forms of bullying. Because in the present work we present children with different types of bullying, it may be possible that girls too will select retaliation as a strategy perceived as effective in coping with harassment. In addition differences based on age may occur. We expect younger children to feel less self-confident in their assertive and aggressive skills than older children (Egan & Perry, 1998; Camodeca, 2003), but they may have the capacity to avoid bad situations through nonchalance. These hypotheses are based on the fact that young children are weaker, more insecure and not yet mature in their coping abilities, which may increase the likelihood of their being bullied (Smith *et al.*, 1999).

Specific research questions

In sum, the general purpose of this work is to investigate what children themselves think are the best interventions to stop bullying. More particularly, this study has a threefold aim: (1) Do proposed interventions vary according to the actual role played in bullying? That is, are the interventions influenced by the fact that the individual concerned is a bully, a follower of the bully, an outsider, a defender of the victim, a

victim, or someone who is not involved? (2) Do proposed interventions vary according to the perspective on the bullying situation? That is, how does the fact that children have to imagine themselves as being a bully, a witness or a victim affect the outcomes? (3) Are there any differences due to gender and age in the interventions proposed?

Method

Sample

The participants were 311 children (155 boys and 156 girls). Pupils came from six primary schools in The Netherlands, mostly in the 7th (35.7%) and 8th (53.7%) grades, but a few (10.6%) attended a mixed class of 7th- and 8th-graders. Pupils' mean age was 11 years ($M = 142.77$ months; $SD = 8.31$).

Families were sent a letter via the schools asking for their consent, which was given for almost all the children (only two children were not allowed to participate). This high rate of consent may be due to the priority given to bullying by the school principals, who urged the families to participate. Information on the participants' socio-economic background was provided by the teachers in the form of details of parents' education and current jobs (on a scale ranging from 1 to 7 from the lowest education/job level to the highest). About 22% of the mothers and 20% of the fathers had jobs for which little or no vocational training was needed; the remaining parents had jobs for which a medium to very high level of education was needed. Family socio-economic status was not related to the children's bullying status.

Procedure

In order to assign every child a role in bullying, a short version of the *Participant role scale* (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1996) was administered. Pupils were tested individually by trained students in a separate room, and were asked to nominate peers who fitted the behaviours as described in the items. The *Effective interventions questionnaire* (a self-report measure) was administered to the group in the classroom. Children were told that all information would be treated as confidential and that it was better not to discuss with their peers what they had written or said.

Instruments

The *Participant role scales* (PRS): Goossens *et al.* (submitted) reduced the 50 original items of Salmivalli, Lagerspetz *et al.* (1996) to 28 on the basis of a pilot study and added four items from the *Aggression and victimization scale* developed by Perry *et al.* (1988). They showed that this short version was stable over a two-year period, both at the level of the scales and at the level of the classifications as bully, follower, outsider, defender, victim and not involved. Moreover, they found the same gender differences reported by Salmivalli, Lagerspetz *et al.* (1996), and demonstrated a link between

these PRS classifications and sociometric status, with defenders being popular and bullies rejected or controversial, while victims were rejected.

We subjected the 32 items to a principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation, which yielded four factors (eigenvalue > 1). The total variance explained was 79.77% (loadings > 0.72). Four items were deleted because of low loadings. All the pro-bullying items (bully, assistant and reinforcer) loaded on the first factor (variance explained = 38.24%). Like Goossens *et al.* (submitted), and like Sutton *et al.* (1999), we divided the large bullying factor for conceptual reasons into two scales according to the content of the items, one for leader-like bullying behaviour ('someone who urges the others to harass the victim'), called the 'bully' scale from now on, and one combining the assistant ('someone who keeps the victim still') and reinforcer ('someone who incites the bully by shouting') items, called the 'follower' scale from now on.

The items for defender ('someone who tells the victim not to worry about it'), outsider ('someone who always leaves as soon as the bullying starts') and victim ('someone who is bullied by the others') loaded on three separate factors (variances explained = 12.07%, 15.99% and 13.47% respectively). The reliability coefficients for the five scales were as follows: bully (six items, $\alpha = 0.96$), follower of the bully (eight items, $\alpha = 0.95$), outsider (six items, $\alpha = 0.93$), defender (four items, $\alpha = 0.88$) and victim (four items, $\alpha = 0.97$). The scores were standardized by class using z -scores. We used the procedure employed by Salmivalli, Lagerspetz *et al.* (1996) to assign each child a role. A child was assigned a role if the score on the scale designed to assess that role was above the mean and if the difference between this scale score and the next highest scale score was at least 0.1. Pupils who received almost equal scores on two or more scales (i.e. whose difference was lower than 0.1, $n = 13$; 4.2%) were considered as not having a clear role and were not included in the analyses. We made one exception only in the case of the scales for bully and follower. Even when the difference between these two scores was smaller than 0.1, we assigned a role to the highest score.

The final sample employed in this study therefore consisted of 298 children (144 girls and 154 boys). Of these, 32 pupils (10.7%) were assigned the role of *bully*, 57 (19.1%) the role of *follower*, 62 (20.8%) the role of *outsider*, 57 (19.1%) the role of *defender* and 42 (14.1%) the role of *victim*. In contrast to Salmivalli, Lagerspetz *et al.* (1996), who also labelled those children who scored below the mean as not having a clear role, we considered these children as *not involved* ($n = 48$; 16.1%) in the bullying situation.

The *Effective interventions questionnaire* (EIQ) was designed by the current authors to investigate the extent to which children considered certain strategies effective in stopping bullying. An overview of the questionnaire, with loadings on the factor analysis, is presented in Table 1. First, children had to imagine playing a certain role (victim, bully or witness). Such roles were combined with three types of bullying (physical, verbal and relational). An example is: 'Imagine you always insult one of your classmates and call him names. What could be done to make you stop?' (situation with children imagining being the bully). For each of these situations children responded to four items indicating different strategies to stop bullying

Table 1. Loadings on the three factors of the *Effective intervention questionnaire*

Perspective	Item	Scenarios								
		Ph	Ve	Re	Ph	Ve	Re	Ph	Ve	Re
<i>Victim</i>	1. I hit and push him/her back ¹	.57	.73	.65						
	2. I do nothing, to prevent him from getting madder				.70	.78	.79			
	3. I ask him why he's doing it and explain to him that his behaviour is wrong							.61	.73	.74
	4. I tell him angrily to stop it							.38	.62	.69
<i>Bully</i>	1. He/she hits and pushes me back ¹	.53	.69	.62						
	2. He does nothing, to prevent me from getting madder				.67	.78	.77			
	3. He asks me why I'm doing it and explains to me that my behaviour is wrong							.65	.72	.69
	4. He tells me angrily to stop it							.54	.58	.67
<i>Witness</i>	1. The victim hits and pushes him/her back ¹	.75	.77	.69						
	2. The victim does nothing, to prevent him from getting madder				.76	.81	.77			
	3. The victim asks him why he's doing it and explains to him that his behaviour is wrong							.67	.71	.72
	4. The victim tells him angrily to stop it							.63	.64	.65

Note: Scenarios: Ph = Physical bullying; Ve = Verbal bullying; Re = Relational bullying. Perspectives: Victims = 'Imagine someone in your class always hits, beats and pushes you (Ph)/ insults and calls you names (Ve)/ excludes you and says bad things about you behind your back (Re). What could be done to make him/her stop? Suppose that . . .'; Bully = 'Imagine you always hit, beat and push one of your classmates (Ph)/ insult one of your classmates and call him/her names (Re)/ exclude one of your classmates and say bad things about him/her behind his/her back (Ve). What could be done to make you stop? Suppose that . . .'; Witness = 'Imagine one of your classmates always hits, beats and pushes another classmates (Ph)/ insults one of your classmates and calls him/her names (Ve)/ excludes one of your classmates and says bad things about him/her behind his/her back (Re). What could be done to make him/her stop? Suppose that . . .'

¹This item changed content on the basis of Ph, Ve, Re, becoming *I myself insult him/her and call him/her names (Ve)* and *I myself exclude him/her and say bad things about him/her behind his/her back (Re)*. The same procedure was used in the bully and witness perspective.

('hitting and pushing back', 'doing nothing', 'asking why' and 'telling angrily to stop': see Table 1, note), answering in this way 36 items. The items had a four-point response modality (1 = *Would certainly not stop*, to 4 = *Would definitely stop*).

We ran a factor analysis (PCA with varimax rotation) on the 36 items (total variance explained = 51.14%, loadings > 0.38). Three factors were retained: *retaliation* (item 1 per nine situations, variance explained = 12.66%), *nonchalance* (item 2 per nine situations, variance explained = 15.93%) and *assertiveness* (items 3 and 4 per nine situations, variance explained = 22.56%). Items were grouped across perspectives in order to create nine variables (three scales for each of the three perspectives, i.e. a retaliation scale for the victim perspective, for the bully perspective and, finally, for the witness perspective; the same was done with the scales for nonchalance and assertiveness). Reliabilities ranged from 0.73 to 0.87. The scores for assertiveness were divided by two, in order to be comparable with those of the other scales.

Results

A cross-tabulation was run in order to check the distribution of gender in function of the role in bullying. As previously reported (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1996; Menesini & Gini, 2000), boys were more often found in the role of bully, follower and (unexpectedly) not involved than girls, who were more often defenders, outsiders and victims ($\chi^2(5) = 86.03$; $p < 0.001$). Since the distinction between role and gender was clear and non-overlapping, we decided to keep these variables apart in the analysis of variance.

First, nine *t*-tests for paired samples were run for couples of variables within the same perspective (e.g. retaliation versus assertiveness when you imagine being a bully), in order to investigate which strategy was chosen most often. Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, *t*-test values and significance for each comparison.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations (in parentheses) and tests for paired samples of the three variables mean scores \times perspectives

Perspective	Strategy	Means (SD)	Comparison	<i>t</i> -test value (<i>df</i>)
Victim				
A	Retaliation	5.17 (2.19)	A–B	2.80 (286)**
B	Nonchalance	4.63 (1.90)	B–C	–7.14 (290)***
C	Assertiveness	5.54 (1.54)	A–C	–2.27 (290)*
Bully				
A	Retaliation	4.81 (2.05)	A–B	–3.95 (286)***
B	Nonchalance	5.48 (2.36)	B–C	–5.39 (291)***
C	Assertiveness	6.19 (2.00)	A–C	–10.40 (285)***
Witness				
A	Retaliation	4.96 (2.05)	A–B	–0.27 (273) <i>ns</i>
B	Nonchalance	4.97 (2.07)	B–C	–5.40 (281)***
C	Assertiveness	5.69 (1.67)	A–C	–5.22 (282)***

Note: *ns* = not significant; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Assertiveness was the strategy most often chosen by children. Retaliation was more often chosen than nonchalance in the victim's perspective, while the converse was true in the bully's perspective.

A MANOVA with repeated measures was run, employing retaliation, nonchalance and assertiveness per three perspectives (bully, victim, witness) as within-subject variables and the actual role in bullying as between-subject factor. Role in bullying reached significance (Pillai's trace = 0.11; $F(15, 723) = 1.86$; $p < 0.05$), but the univariate tests showed only a trend effect for retaliation and assertiveness. Table 3 displays means, standard deviations and a test of group differences. Bullies wished to retaliate more often than the other children, but victims too tended to retaliate more often than children not involved. Defenders, outsiders, victims and children not involved were more often in favour of assertiveness than bullies and followers.

The within-subject effect was significant for perspective (Pillai's trace = 0.30; $F(6, 236) = 16.54$; $p < 0.001$) and for the interaction between role and perspective (Pillai's trace = 0.28; $F(30, 1200) = 2.37$; $p < 0.001$). When children imagined they were the victims or witnesses, they wanted to retaliate against the bully more often than when they adopted the bully's perspective (and more often as victim than witness) ($F(1.62) = 9.02$; $p < 0.001$). However, children chose nonchalance ($F(1.85) = 30.70$; $p < 0.001$) and assertiveness ($F(1.66) = 29.25$; $p < 0.001$) more often when they assumed the bully's perspective than that of the victim or witness (and more often as witness than victim). In addition, the interaction between role and perspective was significant for all three dependent variables: $F(8.11) = 5.21$; $p < 0.001$ for retaliation; $F(9.24) = 2.75$; $p < 0.01$ for nonchalance, and $F(8.31) = 2.57$; $p < 0.01$ for assertiveness. When defenders, outsiders, victims and children not involved imagined being the bully, they chose assertiveness more often than bullies and followers. Defenders and victims chose nonchalance more often than bullies and followers when adopting the bully's perspective. Bullies and followers thought retaliation was effective more often than other children when they adopted the victim's perspective. Again, bullies

Table 3. Means, standard deviations (in parentheses) and test of group differences of the three dependent variables as a function of role in bullying

	Bully	Follower	Defender	Outsider	Victim	Not involved	$F(df)$
Retaliation	5.80 (0.34) ^a	4.76 (0.25) ^{bc}	4.83 (0.25) ^{bc}	4.89 (0.23) ^{bc}	5.15 (0.29) ^{ac}	4.47 (0.27) ^b	2.15(5) [†]
Nonchalance	4.67 (0.39)	5.07 (0.28)	5.23 (0.28)	4.76 (0.26)	5.54 (0.23)	4.90 (0.31)	<i>ns</i>
Assertiveness	5.12 (0.30) ^b	5.33 (0.22) ^{bc}	5.86 (0.22) ^a	5.92 (0.20) ^a	6.09 (0.26) ^a	5.79 (0.25) ^{ac}	2.10(5) [†]

Note: Means in the same row with different superscripts (a – c) differ significantly at $p < 0.10$, two-tailed by the least significant difference test.

[†] $p < 0.10$.

had higher scores on retaliation when thinking from the witness's perspective, which was also found for victims, albeit to a minor extent.

Another MANOVA with repeated measures was run employing the same within-subject variables, but this time gender and grade served as between-subject variables. We removed the group made up of 7th- and 8th-graders, because of its small size and because it could affect the results in respect of 'younger' and 'older' children. Gender (Pillai's trace = 0.08; $F(3,227) = 6.60$; $p < 0.001$) and grade (Pillai's trace = 0.06; $F(3,227) = 5.05$; $p < 0.01$) both reached significance. Girls chose assertiveness more often than boys ($F(1) = 17.75$; $p < 0.001$). No significant effects were found for nonchalance and retaliation. Older children wished to retaliate more often than their younger counterparts ($F(1) = 3.06$; $p < 0.10$, a trend), while young children were more prone to withdraw with nonchalance ($F(1) = 11.28$; $p < 0.01$). No differences in grade were found for assertiveness. The within-subject effect for perspective was significant, as it was also found when the actual role in bullying was used as between-subject effect. Furthermore, the interaction between gender and perspective reached significance (Pillai's trace = 0.14; $F(6,224) = 6.18$; $p < 0.001$), but lacking specific hypotheses we did not investigate such interactions any further.

Discussion

The outcomes of the study shed light on the way in which children involved and not involved in bullying evaluate possible interventions. The most frequently chosen intervention strategy against bullying was assertiveness, which means that children are probably aware of the importance and efficacy of using mediation and assertive skills in order to stop bullying. We may suppose that when children are offered various opportunities, they choose the ones that are more prosocial and adequate (cf. Rudolph & Heller, 1997; Camodeca *et al.*, 2003), who claimed that responses improved when children could reflect upon them), but unfortunately they are not always able to perform them.

However, the picture changed when we also took into account the real and imagined role played by children. As expected, bullies perceived retaliation as the best way to cope with bullying. It is possible that this is the means that really works for them. In fact, bullies use aggression to dominate and to gain power; they are used to harassing others. Furthermore, previous studies claimed that bullies are reactively aggressive (Pellegrini *et al.*, 1999; Camodeca *et al.*, 2002; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002) and select retaliation to respond to provocation—i.e. they respond with counter-aggression and anger when harassed. This may be the reason why they mostly chose retaliation when they imagined being victims or witnesses. The results of the present study confirm and extend this view, with the addition that bullies would also choose retaliation when asked about the best strategy to use against bullying.

Albeit to a lesser extent, victims also displayed a greater preference for retaliation than children not involved. This result seems to lend confirmation to the aforementioned studies which claimed that victims display reactive aggression and wish to retaliate. Victims feel helpless and are continuously harassed; it is likely that their sense of frustration is so high that their desire to retaliate is prompted by anger

and a sense of powerlessness. Furthermore, victims selected retaliation when adopting the witness's, but not the victim's, perspective. It is possible that being the real victims of bullying, their experience is that retaliating against a bully is useless, because it may make him/her even more ruthless. However, it seems that they find retaliation effective when another peer is involved. This can be a sign of their belief in counter-aggression, but also of a lack of belief in their ability to perform it. Victims are probably not as shy and withdrawn as is commonly thought, but are also able to display counter-aggression and retaliation (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Schwartz *et al.*, 1998; Camodeca *et al.*, 2002).

The opposite was found for followers, who thought retaliation effective when in the role of victim, but not when in the role of witness. It may be that they feel frustrated and angry when being directly victimized, or that they do not dare to advise a peer to retaliate. Alternatively, it is feasible that the role of witness is often their own role in reality, when they assist a ringleader bully who is in the process of bullying a peer. In this case, followers would never go against their 'boss', either because they enjoy seeing someone inflicting suffering on another child, or because they are afraid the bully might retaliate against them if they do not do what they are told. Followers are merely the bully's assistants; they are not powerful enough to retaliate and dominate in an effective way.

Bullies and followers thought that assertiveness was not an efficient means to stop bullying, while all the others, even the victims, did think so. It may be that victims indeed think that assertiveness can stop bullying, even if they are not able to perform it. But in this case too we have to consider the perspective assumed by children. Bullies and followers did not favour nonchalance or assertiveness to resolve the conflict, especially when they adopted the bullies' perspective. Because they themselves are the perpetrators, we may surmise that they think that none of these strategies would effectively stop them. Alternatively, because nonchalance and assertiveness could really be effective in stopping bullying (Salmivalli, Karhunen *et al.*, 1996), not choosing them might mean that they do not want to be stopped in their harassment. Defenders, outsiders and children not involved seemed to voice opinions similar to each other. They think retaliation does not work when imagining they are witnesses or victims. It may be that they have tried to retaliate against a bully in the past and know that this strategy is not effective, as the bully may get increasingly ruthless. These children (plus victims) seemed to be very much in favour of strategies aimed at resolving the conflict, such as nonchalance or assertiveness. We noticed that they found these strategies particularly effective when they imagined being the bully. At least, they think that these strategies would work, presumably because they know such strategies would work with them. It is likely that they would not go on bullying if these interventions were put into action. Even if this could be due to their being 'weaker' than the bullies, it is also feasible that they do not want to harass the others and any strategy would be good enough to make them stop. We could surmise that children not directly involved in the bullying (and victims) really think bullying is blameworthy and bullies' behaviour cannot be justified. This outcome leads to the conclusion that the majority of children have been found to favour proper and effective action to stop bullying, as was also found with the paired-sample *t*-tests.

Boys' and girls' answers could be affected by the different cultural roles which exist for gender (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1996; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997). Girls chose assertive strategies more often than boys. They are not expected to fight back, are reared to be more empathic and to reject violence; they are more often found in the role of defender (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1996; Menesini & Gini, 2000), and, furthermore, they develop mediation skills earlier than boys. They are therefore more likely to choose assertive and prosocial strategies and to use constructive conflict resolution more often than boys (Cowie, 2000; Glover *et al.*, 2000). Younger children were less in favour of retaliation and more in favour of nonchalance than older children, as expected. They are usually bullied more (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Olweus, 1993), are probably weaker and cannot use counter-aggression. Nonchalance could be a good way to avoid harassment. Older children may think that nonchalance is childish, because it entails 'doing nothing' and therefore implies weakness, even if this is not actually true. For this reason, too, they may opt for retaliation.

This study has certain limitations. A bias may have occurred because children had to answer similar items that were repeated through different perspectives. It is possible therefore that some children did not properly fill in all the questions because they became tired or irritated. Furthermore, we used structured questions instead of open questions, which would have allowed the children to express their own opinions with more creativity and freedom. We did this to make the instrument easier to administer, since open questions would have considerably increased the time needed for data collection and would therefore not have allowed for a relatively large sample. In addition, structured questions guaranteed a focus on the specific topics we wanted to stress and gave us a precise perception of each item. Further research is advisable in order to improve the instrument—e.g. to allow for open questions or interviews, together with structured items—which could provide more information about what children think about intervention.

A strong point of our study is the use of the PRS, which allows for the identification of several roles, and makes it possible to distinguish more roles than just those of bully and victim or bully/victim. One might object that this system does not allow for the identification of bully/victims, since it is rare to find children with equally high scores on the scales for bully or follower and victim. In fact, we found exactly one child in our sample who could be identified as such, and this child was kept out of the analyses. There may, however, be other ways of assigning roles than just on the basis of *z*-scores. Alternatively, it might be advisable to add specific items to the PRS to capture the particular behaviour of children who are both bullies and victims. One might also object to our use of classifications for both initiative-taking bullies and for those who follow them, despite the absence of clear statistical criteria to support such a distinction. However, Sutton *et al.* (1999) showed that this may well be a valid distinction, as their bullies were much better at 'theory of mind' tasks than the followers. Similarly, Goossens *et al.* (submitted) found that while bullies were more often rejected, followers were more often average in sociometric status. In this study, the followers endorsed retaliation less strongly than the bullies.

In sum, however, we think that the outcomes of the present study are a further step in developing and improving intervention programmes. The results imply that interventions should be different for children with different roles. For instance, bullies and victims, who think retaliation is a good and effective strategy, could be taught non-aggressive responses, social skills and how to cope with different situations in assertive and prosocial ways. It has to be clear that aggression is not an acceptable strategy to reach one's goals. Unfortunately, retaliation seems to be the only effective strategy according to bullies, since they do not perceive nonchalance or assertiveness as effective in making them stop. Bullies therefore seem to be the group that is more in favour of aggression, ready to react, and lacking the necessary prosocial skills to interact with peers in social groups. Assertiveness training is very much favoured by children and has occasionally been provided (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Defenders and outsiders could be employed to demonstrate assertive and prosocial responses to other children, but also the skills to avoid difficult situations by simply withdrawing from them.

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